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ABSTRACT

This study surveyed 10 regular and 10 special educators at a South Bronx, New York, community school regarding their attitudes toward including students with disabilities into general education classrooms. Teachers discussed whether they would volunteer to work with an inclusive program, what they considered the positive and negative effects of inclusion, how they would feel if they were mandated to work in an inclusive classroom, and what would encourage them to consider participating in an inclusive classroom. Special educators reported being glad to work in inclusive classrooms, while five of the general educators said they would refuse and five were willing to try. All special educators felt that the positive outcomes for both disabled and nondisabled students would outweigh any negative outcomes, and that special education students would feel like their negative labels had been removed. Half of the general educators agreed with the special educators, but the others felt that inclusion would not work. While all special educators said they would happily work in inclusive classrooms if mandated, only two general educators agreed, and the other eight said they would rather retire or change schools. Teachers who were apprehensive about inclusion said they would welcome support from administrators. (SM)

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Special and Regular Education Teachers Attitudes Towards Inclusive Programs in an Urban Community School

Abstract

Although Inclusion has been implemented in other states, it is fairly new for New York City. A survey was conducted of twenty teachers at a community school in the South Bronx. The panel of participants was comprised of ten regular and ten special education teachers. The questions on the survey were designed to look into teachers attitudes towards Inclusion because this program has been mandated in this particular school for the 2001-2002 school year. The findings of this study will inform the reader of some of the adequate steps necessary for successful implementation of an Inclusive program.

Introduction

Although we might think that Inclusion is a new movement, it has been around for a while. The 1975 landmark legislation, PL94-142, the education for all handicapped children act has always supported including special education children with the general education population. Special education children have a right to receive an education alongside their non-disabled peers. As of 1990, this landmark was renamed to IDEA: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. An Inclusive learning environment provides the least restrictive learning environment for children. It places students with disabilities in neighborhood schools and general education classes with students their own age. (Grenot-Scheyer, Jubala, & Coots, 1996, p.2). This arrangement promotes membership and development of a sense of community for all students involved in the program. According to Odom et al., (1996) elementary schools afford a natural setting for Inclusion,

where children with disabilities may spend all or part of their day in a regular education class in a public school building.

Ways of making it work

The success of an Inclusive program depends on the instruction, the context being taught and the learners (Tisdell, 1995, p.4). Educators in Inclusive programs must be aware of all the differences that each child brings into the classroom. The teaching plans and strategies must reflect these differences. Collaboration is the backbone of successful Inclusion (Edmiaston, 1998). In addition, according to Susan Janko and Alice Porter (1997), the social context of child care and classrooms is essential for developing the values we say are important for our children now and as future leaders. It is imperative that teachers (special and regular education), para-professional, parents, and students work together. The classroom must be viewed as a large community where all involved help and support one another (Edmiaston & Fitzgerald, 1998). Where everyone is treated the same, everyone makes contributions to the class. Projects conducted in class include a variety of experiences and activities prepared to meet all the different needs of the entire class (Edmiaston, 1998). There are a number of ways to make Inclusion successful: 1) Teach and support-one teacher teaches the lesson, the other lends support. 2) Teach and Compliment- one teacher teaches content and the other teaches a complimentary skill. 3) Speak, Write, and Show- one teaches content, one demonstrates. 4) Parallel Teaching- one teaches subject

content, one teaches parallel. 5) Station Teaching- Teachers teach different things at the different centers and students rotate within centers (PDC conference 2001, pp.6-7). Regardless of which method(s) are used, there will always be a para-professional in the room who works alongside both teachers. He/she however, is not allowed to team teach or take over any lessons. These different teaching techniques allow all children regardless of their learning styles to gain some benefits from the lessons taught.

According to Winebrenner (1996, p.57), teachers need to teach in a manner that will ensure that all children can learn. In an Inclusive classroom, these expectations will be the same. Teachers need to set short term goals that can be realized by their students. Success is about setting and reaching goals (Winebrenner, 1995, p.59). Teachers need to use a term called metacognition which is the monitoring of one's own thinking through the learning process (Winebrenner, p.62). Its purpose is to make students aware of how they think, acknowledge when they do not understand something and modify their thinking accordingly.

In order for children to learn, they need to feel that they are given choices. The most potent motivator in any classroom is giving children the opportunity to consistently make meaningful choices (Winebrenner, 1995, p.64). Children will be more willing to learn when they have some input in what is expected of them. For example, read the story and write a paragraph or read story or make a picture

and include a sentence to title the picture (Winebrenner, 1995, p.64). When children are presented with exciting and relevant content, their resistance to learn disappears. Ms. Winebrenner suggest that teachers conduct an interest survey in order to properly learn the interest of each student. Accessing the interest of each class member allows the teacher to combine what children are expected to learn (the assigned curriculum) with what they are interested in learning (Winebrenner, 1995, p. 89).

Who is Responsible for What

According to the Board of Education Inclusion manual (p. 11) each of the teachers in the program have individual and joint responsibilities. The regular education teacher is responsible for determining curriculum, developing test materials and enrichment. The special education teacher is responsible for the monitoring and maintaining I.E.P goals and objectives for all special education students in the class. He/she should develop re-teaching materials and modify test materials according to the needs of the special education students. Creating behavior contracts and original activities for children as needed.

Both teachers are responsible for contacting the parents, averaging grades, checking papers, presentation of lessons, and developing games and activities that require the use of manipulatives.

Benefits to disabled and non-disabled children

There is an increase in communication and social interaction. The children are exposed to age appropriate behaviors and skills models. They also have access to a rich core curriculum (Bishop, Coots, Grenot-Scheyer, & Jubala, 1996, p.4). Although the benefits of Inclusion are more extensive for disabled students, non-disabled students also gain some rewards from the Inclusive classroom: 1) There is an increase in positive attitudes and comfort levels in regards to students with disabilities. 2) students experience an increase in their moral and ethical principles. 3) children develop good and caring friendships with each other.

Benefits to Parents

Some parents with other children in their family are more at ease because all their children attend school together and in the same community (Bishop, Coots, Grenot-Scheyer, & Jubala, 1996, p.5).

What I asked Teachers?

When conducting the survey, I asked my participants many questions. Here are some of the more important questions asked :

1) Would you volunteer to work the Inclusion program?
2) What do you think would be the positive/negative effect of Inclusion?
3) If you were mandated to work in an inclusive classroom, how would you feel?
4) What would encourage you to consider you to consider participation in

an Inclusive classroom?

What the Teachers said:

Answers to question #1

The special education teachers would gladly work in an Inclusive classroom, they feel that up to now, they have been excluded from many school events: trips, assemblies, and school visits by members of the community. They also feel excluded in the distribution of materials. They are not receiving sufficient adequate materials to teach the curriculum and meet all the standards set forth by City and State. Many special education teachers feel that their students are put down due to the many labels associated with special education. The majority of these teachers (about 7) felt that the stigma given to their students extended to them was well. They felt that society views them as less than the regular teachers.

Five of the ten regular education teachers were curious and had questions regarding special education and would willingly try it. The other five refused and said they would much rather resign than work with special education children.

Answers to question #2

All special education teachers felt that the positive outcomes to both regular and special education children would outweigh any negative outcomes. They felt that special education children would feel that "the label" was finally removed and that they now are just like their non-disabled classmates. Five of the

regular education teachers agreed with special education teachers that the good outcomes would outweigh any negative ones, in other words there was more to be gained by all if the program is put into effect. The remaining five teachers felt that this program would not be received warmly by the parents of non-disabled children. They felt that their students might copy some of the "negative" behavior of the disabled group. They do not feel that Inclusion could work.

Answers to question #3

All special education teachers would happily do it. Two out of ten would gladly do it. The remaining eight would rather retire or seek employment at another school that was not doing Inclusion.

Answers to question #4

This question applied more to those teachers refusing to work the Inclusion program under any circumstances. These teachers said that they would welcome support from administration. The planning and development of more Inclusion workshops would be a plus for both teachers and parents. The availability of more funds to purchase appropriate materials and equipment.

Conclusion

One of the reasons why I chose to research Inclusion is because it is such a controversial topic. Our school offers special education services and some of the children with severe problems have constant outbursts, they are verbally and physically abusive to their classmates and teachers. They give their teachers

a difficult time. Many leave their classrooms and disrupt the other classrooms and have hurt some of the children in the school in both regular and special education. We need to clarify that the entire special education population does not behave in this manner. Some of these children do so well that they test out of special education and become part of the regular education classes. Through my survey, I discovered that many teachers are afraid to work with special education children because of many negative things they have heard or seen.

Through my training and research, I have found that not all children that are presently in special education are adequate candidates for Inclusion. Inclusion would not prove beneficial for them, instead it would be better if they remained in a self contained classroom, one with a special education teacher, and a paraprofessional. A student with disabilities needs to be in a classroom with the highest possibilities of successfully fulfilling the long and short-term objectives that are part of their Individualized Educational Program (I.E.P.).

Although I did not include parents' input in my research, I must place emphasis on the fact that parents are an essential part of a successful Inclusion program. But if we do not educate the teachers participating in this program, they will have negative attitudes towards it and towards the children. As a result, parents might object to it . But if remove the negative attitudes that teachers may have towards the program, they will transfer these positive feelings to the parents and the students.

Teachers should be given the opportunity to participate in workshops and training on Inclusion. As educators we need to become open-minded and realize that every special education student is different. With the proper training and understanding, teachers can offer special education children the right opportunity to succeed. As educators we have the power to positively change and influence the lives of the children that cross our path, we need to remove some of the stigmas and labels from special education children. Children are children, we should not separate them, they all have their positive and negative attributes. It is our job and duty to make their journey in school a fun, enjoyable and worthwhile experience. We have the capacity to make a difference, and we should.

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